

This is author version of article published as:

Franz, Jill M. (2002) Fostering social responsibility for interior design practice. IDEA Journal:pp. 19-34.

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Fostering social responsibility for interior design practice

Introduction

Tertiary interior design courses incorporating the equivalent of four years education aim to provide students with the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills and values needed to practice as professional interior designers. In doing this, the various universities recognise the parameters and elements of professionalism formalised by the International Federation of Interior Designers and Interior Architects (IFI) and correspondingly endorsed by the Design Institute of Australia (DIA), a member organisation of IFI and professional organisation for design professionals in Australia.

According the IFI charter:

'The professional interior designer is a person, qualified by education, experience, and recognized skills, who – identifies, researches and creatively solves problems pertaining to the function and quality of interior environments; - performs services relative to interior spaces including programming, design analysis, space planning, aesthetics and inspection of work on site, using specialized knowledge of interior construction, building systems and components, building regulations, equipment, material and furnishings; and – prepares drawings and documents relative to the design of interior spaces; - in order to enhance the quality of life and protect the health, safety and welfare of the public' (FIDER Standards & Guidelines).

The last part of the statement emphasises the ethical aspect of professional practice. In the DIA Guide to Professional Conduct, there is the very explicit expectation that members will '...conduct themselves honourably and honestly in their dealings with their clients, the community and their colleagues' and that they will accept '...a professional obligation to further the social and aesthetic standards of the community' (DIA Guide to Membership including the Guide to Professional Conduct, p.12). A review of other codes of ethics, including those concerned with the design professions such as architecture, reveal general principles of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

There are probably very few of us, if any, that would question the desirability or even the necessity of these attributes in our graduates. The question I would like to pose, however, is how many interior design educators *overtly* attempt to foster the development of these attributes through their curriculum design and teaching? This paper outlines one such attempt. In particular, it describes an approach that was implemented in the first semester of a Graduate Diploma in Interior Design; a course that is designed as the equivalent of the fourth year of a four-year undergraduate program. The description also includes the rationale for the approach highlighting in the process a focus beyond professional ethics to the broader area of social responsibility.

Social responsibility and professional practice

In the case to be described, social responsibility incorporating professional ethics is considered a more appropriate focus for the following reasons. First, it is understood that all aspects of life are interconnected. To facilitate change (learning) in a student, you connect learning with the student as a person and with his or her relationship to the world rather than exclusively to a part of the world such as design practice. This interpretive view is supported educationally with respect to an appreciation of teaching as bringing about in the student explicit awareness of knowledge or knowing as the outcome of a particular orientation to a part connected to a greater world. The interpretive view is also substantiated by the findings

of a study I conducted of designers' conceptions of design in the interior design context. Of the conceptions identified, designers with the most 'sophisticated' saw their design practice as being integrally tied to their non-practice activities and other roles in life; and vice versa (Franz 1998a). In another study to do with the teaching design students about sustainable practice, the research indicated that attention be directed to general sustainable behaviour and broad attitudinal change rather than to just making students more informed about sustainable design practices and products (Franz 1998b).

Second, a focus on social responsibility reflects an increasing awareness for professionals to be more able to respond to a highly complex, value-laden, dynamic society. Schon in his 1983 publication, *The Reflective Practitioner*, writes of a general crisis of confidence in professional knowledge. According to Schon (1983), '...professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice' (p. 14). In more recent times, this awareness has resulted in professional organisations and accrediting bodies demanding broader attributes as well as discipline specific knowledge and skills in graduates. The response for various universities in Australia has been to add generic capabilities or attributes to their list of learning outcomes. For example, in my university the aim is to 'produce graduates who possess knowledge, professional competence, a sense of community, and the capacity to continue their professional and personal development throughout their lives' (QUT's Teaching Strategic Plan 1999-2003). This has resulted in the development of a category of learning outcomes labelled generic attributes or generic capabilities that, unfortunately, are espoused and generally taught separately from discipline skills and knowledge. In my view, generic capabilities such as critical thinking, communication, community involvement, and so on, are integrally connected to professional practice and as such should be an explicit yet integral component of the substantive and procedural content of our courses.

Third, social responsibility is considered a more appropriate focus because the term 'responsibility' has a greater sense of moral agency and empowerment attached to it. As Preston (1997) suggests '...responsibility' opens the way to an ethic which is holistically responsive to the past, the present *and* the future, to the parts *and* the whole, to the self *and* the other...' (p. 69). The term social responsibility is also associated with the more general notion of citizenship and with a view of education as a 'practice which encourages students to reflect upon who they are and their roles in society; it is an education that allows students to make choices and to experience a sense of agency' (Heath 2000, pp. 43,44). While Heath presents this notion as the way forward, she also recognises the challenge for educators where economic rationalism treats individuals as resources for the economy seen as an end in itself (p. 47).

Having presented the rationale for an explicit and substantively related focus on social responsibility, the following section describes how this was implemented in the first semester of a Graduate Diploma in Interior Design.

Integrating social responsibility in the 'what' and 'how' of the graduating program

Considering the learning and teaching context as a whole

As previously indicated, social responsibility is viewed as an integral aspect of human action encompassing interior design practice and the associated notion of professionalism. 'If the aim is to produce graduates who will practice as socially responsible professionals, integration is essential' (Prosser 1995, p. 31). To facilitate this holistic appreciation in Semester 1, 2001, it was necessary to make it an overt part of every unit constituting the program. Fortunately, as course coordinator, I was able to incorporate this focus in the content of the four units and as the lecturer for three out of the four units I was able to implement teaching strategies designed to address the specific aims. I was also fortunate in that this course together with the undergraduate course had been structured to achieve as much integration as possible across semester units as well as from one year to the other. In the Graduate Diploma in Interior Design, the design and research units are seen as the main vehicles for encouraging development in and an awareness of design as a socially significant,

responsible, responsive and rigorous activity. This is supplemented by two other units including one that uses conservation as a way of highlighting broad social/environmental issues of design and another that focuses on professionalism and professional ethics within the broader area of social responsibility (Refer to Figure 1).

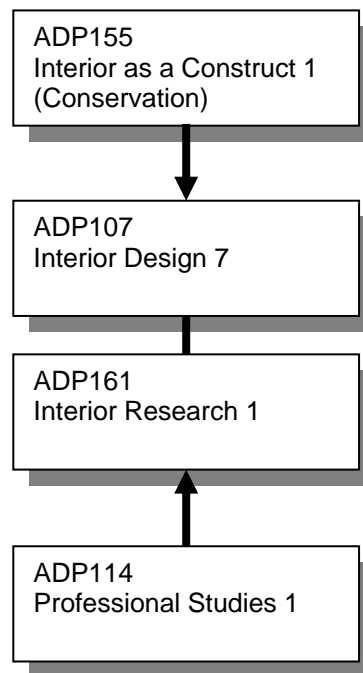


Figure 1: First semester program – Graduate Diploma in Interior Design

In implementing this holistic approach, I was also cognisant of the overall aims of the course, which along with the rationale for the course structure, are made explicit to students. The abridged version is that the course aims to provide students with the opportunity to consolidate:

- (1) An appreciation of design as a response to cultural, social and personal issues and, correspondingly, as a facilitator of cultural, social and personal change. Among other things this also involves an appreciation of life as a source of knowledge, inspiration and innovation; a commitment to improving person-environment interaction and a commitment to continuing education (life-long learning).
- (2) An appreciation of experience as interpretive and contextual; of interaction as a dialectic interplay between people and the social and physical environment; and of design as a facilitator of this interplay.
- (3) An ability to approach professional activities in a deep holistic way incorporating a commitment to look beyond what is given and to question and challenge issues from various perspectives.
- (4) An ability to collaborate and communicate proficiently including the ability to empathise, mediate and negotiate.
- (5) An ability to undertake tasks at a level of competence commensurate with that of a beginning professional. This involves being able to address situations ethically and in an environmentally responsible way; having a sound degree of technical, management and aesthetic proficiency.

As is evident from the above objectives, there is no formal distinction between generic attributes and content knowledge. It is also apparent that social responsibility is a tightly interwoven and significant component. Given this, the educator faces several challenges such as: How to provide students with the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and values including social responsibility in a cohesive and meaningful way while at the same time enabling specific capabilities to be emphasised? How to establish that students have achieved the objectives, given that values cannot be taught and demonstrated in the same way as a skill? How to make the students' learning explicit to them?

In order to develop a curriculum and teaching approach to address the above questions, it was necessary to consider other elements of the teaching and learning context. These included the contact time for each unit, the scheduling of the units and their temporal relationship, available resources including the physical nature of the teaching/learning environment, the number of students and their educational and cultural background.

Given, where possible, the need to program classes at night to enable students to work in practice, most units were scheduled over two nights for thirteen weeks allowing on average two hours per unit per week. Because design is the integrating unit, for selected weeks it was scheduled in a four-hour block at night and six-hour blocks on specific afternoons. With approximately twenty students in each unit, it was possible to consider several different teaching approaches. The underlying rationale was to encourage as much active participation and engagement with the materials of the learning situation as possible. Lectures involving passive listening were kept to the maximum of an hour per class. The overall aim was to integrate content and make it meaningful through doing. As well as learning to design, students also learn moral behaviour experientially (Preston 1997, p. 193). '...it seems that the route to successful integration of social responsibility with the professional methodology parts of a course may be via appropriate problems and projects' (Prosser 1995, p. 31). As will be evident, the design project became the major vehicle in this regard, the same project spanning the four units to various degrees.

The various teaching approaches and strategies described in the following section were also selected in recognition of the types of students enrolled in the units. Approximately half the students were from the undergraduate program. The remaining students were from other courses such as architecture and other countries mainly South East Asia. A few of the students worked full-time in design practice.

Identifying and integrating the 'what' and 'how' in and across the units

As mentioned previously, a semester long project became the main vehicle for among other aims fostering social responsibility awareness and developing moral autonomy in the individual student. In this respect the project was designed to mimic reality and act as a stimulus for identifying social issues, learning how to address and critique personal decision-making processes, and for seeing how design expertise could be applied for the benefit of the community. Ultimately, it was planned to provide a foundation for internalising a value system based on moral autonomy and for motivating the individual to take responsibility for the wellbeing of others. 'The essence of autonomy is the capacity to exercise choice in making independent decisions. It requires owning and acting on a value system that is internalised rather than merely adopted because it is prescribed by an external authority' (Preston 1997, p. 193).

The site for the project was a predominantly disused building on a major street corner in an inner city suburb undergoing gentrification (Figure 2). Among other things, the building was once an open-air theatre. The Art Deco façade has some architectural merit and this together with its variety of uses over the last 100 years including that of an open air theatre has resulted in it being character listed by the council. It is located in an area of combined residential, commercial and light industrial use. The area immediately around the site is well known for prostitution and drug taking. All this happens opposite one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city.

Figure 2: The Rivoli Theatre site in New Farm (Photograph by author)

For the **design unit**, the students were required to explore potential uses of the site and to develop a design proposal for one of the uses (or combination of uses). I highlighted in the handout to the students that the project was an opportunity for them to explore and challenge their own underlying values and preconceptions by considering uses that are viewed as marginal by some groups in society and that may also be held as taboo by themselves. The students identified a variety of potential uses through group discussion and an analysis of the community context. These included a combined boutique brothel and nightclub, a 'same sex' brothel (Figure 3, Figure 4), injection rooms, a multi cultural community centre, a drop-in centre for the homeless, a 'reality' youth centre, a sexual health education centre, job centre, childcare centre and an architectural museum. Allowing students to choose a use enabled the content of learning to be related directly to their interests and experience, and capitalise on the richness of material made available to other students through group discussions and critiques.

The following figures show a street elevation, section and ground floor plan for a 'same sex' brothel proposed by one of the students. The decision to leave the exterior street facades as existing is in recognition of the historical contextual significance of the building. Sensitivity to the values of others is also demonstrated by discretely locating the entry in a secondary street and by using minimal signage to advertise the brothel.

Figure 3: Street elevation and section (Student proposal)

Figure 4: Ground floor plan (Student proposal)

For the students generally, the project was an opportunity to look beyond the notion of design as a commercial commodity; to consider how it can be an educative, socially responsive and responsible vehicle. It was also an opportunity to appreciate the connection between interior design and other design disciplines and to realise that it is not always possible or appropriate to draw definite boundaries between them. Specifically, it encouraged such things as:

- Independent and cooperative work in an atmosphere of collegiality and social responsibility.
- Exploration of situations from various personal, social and cultural perspectives.
- The opportunity to explore personal strengths and weaknesses in critical and constructive terms.
- The opportunity to deal with the ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty of social issues.
- The integration of theory and practice in a conceptually sound and socially responsible way.
- The development of awareness of differences in gender, culture and customs and the opportunity to demonstrate this through application.
- Assertive behaviour while respecting the rights of others.
- An appreciation of involvement in social issues as a component of professional practice.

To facilitate the project and the above objectives, I implemented various teaching strategies including lectures from professionals representing the relevant design professions, tutorials incorporating groups of students discussing their proposals, critique sessions requiring each student to justify their proposals, field trips to the site and local community, and studio sessions enabling students and tutor to meet on a one-to-one basis. Students were required to make interim submissions with each submission assessed and detailed feedback provided. In the initial stages the assessment focused for the most part on the process undertaken by the student. For the final submission, students were guided by a list of questions encouraging them to explicitly consider the physical, socio/cultural, instrumental and existential interaction between people and the environment. Examples of social responsibility type questions include: Have you defined the meaning of local in this development by accepting global impacts while at the same time remaining sensitive to relational (face-to-face interaction), historical and identity issues? Through your attempts to challenge norms have you only served to legitimise and reproduce prevailing relations and practices of power? Does the design of the exterior give consideration to the feelings and perceptions of the community, eg if a brothel, has this been handled sensitively? The project and submission requirements were

developed in part as opportunities for students to convey social responsibility values as well as laying a foundation for ongoing development. The idea being that values and attitudes are reflected in the decisions made by students about the environment.

Aspects of the design project and social responsible issues were supported through the **Interior as a Construct** unit using conservation as the frame-of-reference. In broad terms, the unit aims to:

- Provide for the exploration of environment in relation to social and cultural identity.
- Provide for the development of an understanding of 'historical' spaces as exemplars in design and designing.
- Provide for an overview of local, national and international trends to do with conservation, preservation and restoration.
- Provide for the basic understanding of the nature of conservation and restoration and the policies that direct their implementation.

In social responsibility terms, the unit aims to facilitate a deep, intellectual understanding of the social dimension of designing enabling in the process a connection for the student to the roles of citizen and professional. For the first part of the unit, students were required to explore and document the historical significance of the site for the design project, to develop an appreciation of the space as a place of cultural value and of the role of legislation in maintaining and/or revealing significance. The second project requiring a proposal for an installation focused on the concept of monuments and their relevance in society. In particular it focused on Australian indigenous communities in the context of the Stolen Generations Memorial: A National Design Competition. Teaching approaches adopted included, among others, guest presentations from council, government and relevant heritage bodies; and professional and student debates on issues to do with heritage and cultural significance. While debates have advantages in requiring students to focus on detail and developing a basis for sound argument, they encourage an adversarial approach where there is no room to negotiate (Prosser 1995, p. 16).

The design project and the 'construct' project were supported directly through the **research unit** sharing and consolidating many of the objectives outlined. Students completed two projects. The first project required them to locate, retrieve and review information relevant to a topic associated with the design project and to present this as a written 'professionally' prepared report. In addition to retrieving information at an advanced level, they were also asked to be systematic, rigorous and ethical in sourcing, retrieving and using information, particularly information and ideas that are the intellectual property of another person or group. Some of the topics explored included: sexual health education; understanding why young people engage in hip hop graffiti; male sex work and safe sex practice; urban renewal; and empowerment for the homeless.

The first project involved students in collecting and reviewing secondary data. In the second project, they were asked to collect, analyse, interpret and apply primary data collected through first hand field research undertaken by themselves in the community associated with the design project. One of the aims of this project was to get students personally close to the varying value systems and lived experiences of those in the community and to develop an understanding of the ethical issues to do with privacy, confidentiality, autonomy and so on. In relating directly with people in the community, students were required to follow stringent procedures defined and approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Indeed, before I implemented the unit, I had to get a formal application approved by the committee. An example of topics for this project include: 'Fortitude Valley: A study of Liveability'; 'An Exploration of Women's Refuge Shelters'; 'Needs of Individuals and Families Migrating to Australia'; 'Ageing and Dependency'; and 'What Makes a House a Home?'

The main teaching approaches in the research unit were lectures to do with qualitative research approaches, rigour and ethics; tutorials and self-selected projects that required students to work conceptually and experientially as well as analyse, synthesise, critically evaluate, interpret and apply ethical principles. This unit also required students to keep e-journals and to use email as one means of communicating with me; asking questions,

describing the process undertaken for the last week, clarifying issues, conveying feelings. This format enabled students to discuss issues at a very personal level with assured confidentiality and to receive feedback promptly. The following extract gives some insight into the qualitative nature of this form of communication.

'Not much to report and no queries this week as I have been catching up and 'restarting' all the projects put on hold by recent events. I have a copy of the ethics approval and have reviewed some of the examples you placed in the Resource Centre – one of which was entirely relevant to my design project as well!...I was in the Valley the other day and the thought occurred that I could simply take the opportunity to head toward the Urban Renewal [project] and ask whom ever I could find some questions. Then I realised that as I hadn't memorised the statement about the purpose etc of the questions, I wasn't in a position ethically to inform of my intent etc – so I had to rethink my approach. I guess that's one of the things you want us to learn – research isn't simply a matter of asking questions on spec and 'hoping' for a result to appear. Oh well, back to formulating my approach...'

The three units described so far were all supported through a **professional studies unit** that focused directly on professionalism, ethics and social responsibility. Specifically, the unit aimed to provide for the development of an understanding of professionalism and the evolution of the interior design profession as well as of professional organisations and their responsibilities to the professional and the public. As well as being an issue for individual professionals and citizens in general, this unit also highlighted the notion of social responsibility as an issue for groups, in this case the professional organisation representing design. The activities in the unit highlighted the relationship between professionalism and social responsibility and obligation; the need to assert individual rights while respecting the rights of others; and the need to establish networks for maintaining an awareness of the profession and issues relevant to continuing education.

The activities involved a seminar and project. The seminar allowed students to share their thoughts and views on a particular aspect of professionalism and social responsibility and to gain feedback from their peers and tutor in a constructive and supportive environment. The seminar also proved to be an effective mechanism for efficiently disseminating information about a range of issues and gaining an appreciation of the different perspectives held by others. Students were given a list of topics from which to choose or alternatively they could identify their own topic. The suggestions ranged from a description of the application of professional expertise in addressing a specific social or environmental issue/problem (for example, discrimination) to an exploration of a future scenario and its implications for society and interior design (such as nanotechnology). Several of the topics chosen and discussed by students included: 'How can we as designers contribute to sustainable environments?'; 'A critical analysis of how a particular interior design project is portrayed in a specific magazine'; 'Consumerism and its relationship to interior design'; 'Design and consumption'; 'Designer or artist?'; 'Nanotechnology: Welcome to the future'.

With respect to the project, this required the students to write a critical response to the 'Aesthetics + Ethics' article by Ewan McEoin the editor of Inside Interior Review in the No. 17 issue. In the article, McEoin questions the effectiveness of contemporary design in responding to social issues including those of 'sustainment'. The question is posed as to how designers can be more responsive and responsible in and through design. Many students found it difficult to know where to start with this project and required considerable guidance. Overall, it proved to be an effective vehicle for analysing current situations, speculating about the future and critically evaluating issues in terms of the design profession.

Evaluation of the approach to fostering social responsibility

The question to be addressed is whether or not the program was effective in fostering social responsibility as intended. Some of the mechanisms I set in place to help gauge this included monitoring class attendance, observing and listening to students during class sessions, formal feedback sessions from the class representative, the quality of work submitted and formal externally conducted student evaluations of the units and my teaching.

The class attendance indicating level of interest and motivation and a significant aspect in fostering social responsibility was at approximately 85% throughout the semester. The only unit that did not perform as well as the others was design. Many of the students who worked found it difficult to attend on Friday afternoons even though I had provided them with letters requesting support from their employers. Here was a real life situation where there was conflict between the responsibilities as an employee and those as a student. These difficulties were addressed by providing additional flexible consultation times. Other problems identified by students regarding design concerned the structuring of the sessions over the night and the afternoons and with the international students who expressed difficulty in understanding what was required.

My observations together with the feedback indicate that I will have to give greater attention to making the learning of social responsibility more meaningful to international students. What I failed to recognise was that students from non-Western backgrounds have different expectations of teaching and learning and, in some respects, different value systems (Prosser 1995, p.19). It was obvious that they had difficulty in expressing their views and being required to critically examine the work of authors who are seen to have authority and as such should not be questioned. Prosser (1995) suggests patience, constructive feedback, flexibility and some assignments that are directly relevant to their different backgrounds (pp. 19,20).

From the quality of the work submitted, it would appear that the overall approach has been reasonably successful in making students more aware of social responsibility and professional ethics issues and of providing a sound basis for encouraging this development further in Semester 2. Of course, as Prosser (1995) suggests, the ultimate test will be when students or graduates are faced with real life ethical dilemmas. The approach adopted in this course is to prepare them by encouraging and enabling them to be well-informed and sympathetic to different points of view. In all, it strives for a '...pedagogy where students define themselves as political subjects capable of exhibiting critical sensibilities, courage and forms of solidarity rooted in strong commitment to freedom and justice – a pedagogy which links university knowledge to the different subject relations which help constitute their everyday lives' (Giroux 1992 in Heath 2000, p. 45).

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Acknowledgement

Bradley Monin (Graduate Diploma student for his approval to use illustrations of his design proposal)